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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000400

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ELECTORAL COMMISSION ADMITS BIAS BY STATE MEDIA

REF: 03 LILONGWE 1202

1. (SBU) Summary. At a bruising meeting convened by donor chiefs of mission on May 11 with representatives of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) and the directors-general of state-controlled radio and television, the Commission itself acknowledged that election coverage has been heavily biased in favor of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) party. According to one Commissioner, by not providing a level playing field, the state-run media knowingly contravened accepted agreements and guidelines. With only days remaining before polling day on May 18, inequitable coverage of the opposition has already tarnished the elections and will certainly cause them to be assessed as less than fully free and fair. End Summary.

2. (SBU) When confronted with weekly reports by the MEC Media Monitoring Units indicating blatant imbalance in their coverage of the elections, the directors-general of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi (TVM) cursorily offered up a very tepid defense. Instead, they blamed the Electoral Commission for not forcing them to follow rules they themselves had previously agreed to. (Note: When the director-general of MBC said he had never received any guidance, the head of the Media Monitoring Unit produced a letter signed by the director-general acknowledging receipt of the guidelines and his agreement to follow them. End note.) One of the two Commissioners present responded with a stinging rebuke that MBC and TVM had been publicly and privately notified many times of their flaunting of the guidelines.

3. (SBU) One political party has sued MBC, TVM, and the Electoral Commission over the unfair media coverage. The case is pending in the courts, and a ruling is expected May 16. The Electoral Commission itself had chided both MBC and TVM on May 3 for not following media rules and guidelines during the campaign, but later that week withdrew the allegations and apologized.

4. (SBU) Comment: Since MBC is the only medium to reach the entire population, fair and accurate election information has been denied to a large percentage of Malawi's predominantly rural population. Accordingly, the USG, the UK, the EU, and other donors have already made it known to the GOM that the state-owned media's coverage has been unacceptable and, no matter what happens on polling day, will negatively affect the credibility of the elections.

BROWNING